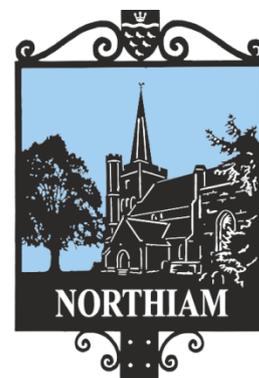


# Northiam Parish Council

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## **MINUTES** for Parish Meeting held on **THURSDAY 3<sup>rd</sup> FEBRUARY** at 7pm

Cllr Sue Schlesinger, Chair of the Parish Council, welcomed the audience, parish, district & county councillors. She then introduced David Amphill, who had kindly agreed to attend the meeting as a moderator / observer.

David Amphill (DA) said that since 2003 he's been a member of Rye Town Council, has been a representative at Rother DC between 2007 and 2019 and is now President of ESALC (East Sussex Association of Local Councils). He said that he had no views about the issues due to be raised at the meeting. Trevor Leggo, CEO of ESALC couldn't attend tonight's meeting, but is aware of the current issues in Northiam. DA stated that ESALC are very strong on training for councillors and the organisation will be on hand to continue to offer help and advice. He then handed back to Cllr Schlesinger.

SS explained the purpose of the Parish Meeting, which she had called under the Local Government Act of 1972, was to address the issues raised in the village following Cllr Streatfeild's recent posts on social media, pointing out that there had been previous rumblings which is why a by-election for a new parish councillor has been called. She then proceeded to introduce Ben Dallimore, one of the parish councillor candidates for hustings. Unfortunately, the other candidate wasn't able to attend.

Before the hustings could begin, someone in the audience raised a point of order asking if it was procedurally correct for hustings to go ahead with only one candidate present. Cllr Schlesinger pointed out that the other candidate had equally been informed, albeit via social media as an incorrect email address had been used by the Clerk, and had confirmed that she could attend the hustings the following week at the Parish Council meeting. No other objections were raised.

The candidate, Ben Dallimore gave some details of his background both personally and professionally and his previous experience of local matters. Time didn't allow for in-depth detail, but he was happy to talk to people after the meeting. Regarding Northiam and St Francis Fields (SFF), he stated that he was against DIY livery because, in his opinion, it was not financially viable. However, he felt that there are other, better solutions. e.g a co-operative getting together and bidding for the tender. In summary, he stated that he is a stickler for rules & had already downloaded the 'Good Councillor Guide'. He finished his hustings by promising 3 things: he will live & die by the aforementioned rules, he will call out those who break them & he will ensure that *YOU*, the residents, know the rules and help you to hold people to account.

Cllr Schlesinger thanked Ben and then gave a summary of the different types of meetings and which are open to the public for clarity: Parish Council monthly meetings and SFF committee meetings (3 CIC Directors & 3 parish councillors) are open to the public and agendas and minutes are publicised. CIC meetings are not open to the public, but in the future, will be open to members too. Membership will be open to all. SS finished by saying that the Clerk would be taking minutes of the meeting, and that to aid her in that task, the meeting was being recorded through the PA system. The recording would be deleted once the minutes from the meeting had been ratified.

### ***Open Forum***

Cllr Schlesinger then stated that following the post on social media, those who have been mentioned have requested the right to reply. They were each given a set amount of time of 3 minutes.

She introduced Pete Sargent, former Chair of Parish Council who read from his prepared statement. (Appendix 1 attached)

Cllr Schlesinger then introduced Tony Biggs, Vice-Chair who read from his prepared statement. (Appendix 2 attached)

Then Jacqui Harding, former Chairman & Councillor since 2015 read from her prepared statement. (Appendix 3 attached)

And finally, David Green, Director of the CIC read from a prepared statement. (Appendix 4 attached)

Cllr Schlesinger then said that any comments / questions / statements from the floor could now be taken.

Cllr Streatfeild (JS) spoke first: He said that he has lived in Northiam for 30 years and his ex-partner was the Deputy-Manager of the Blue Cross centre. Historically local residents were very supportive of the charity and funded the sand school and enjoyed many events there such as gymkhanas and Christmas services. He thought Pete Sargent's (PS) idea to purchase the site was brilliant and he was fully behind it having read the supporting document for the government loan which states that it would be for the good of the village. Since then, a couple of local residents who wanted to stable their horses were turned away.

It was hard to sell the idea to the village, as people would be paying for it. Hence it was going to be a community asset. The site was never intended to be commercial equine centre. It was meant to be a DIY livery so that all the other things such as gymkhanas, dog agility, horse charities etc. could also be possible. JS went on to say that the other reason for the purchase was to save it from development. He had only discovered this week that after lockdown in November '20 the first thing the CIC had set up was a planning committee proposing that the Doctor's Field could be built on. That was never in any presentation delivered to the village or to the government. Members of the council had no idea of this, they had never heard about any development apart from the small exception site. He finished by saying that although people are mad at him, he was mad too. He felt extremely disappointed and let down. The residents are funding the site and it was meant to be a village asset. It therefore needs to do two things: it needs to pay its way but in a way that the

village can use it. If it's just for commercial operators, you cut out a lot of enjoyment for local people – it causes a conflict of interest. He thanked the audience for their time.

Lauren Sapstead stood up to speak, but was interrupted by Ben Dallimore who said that Cllr Streatfeild was incorrect in what he had just stated. He had a document that clearly shows there was always going to be some building. JS said that was the exception site only.

Lauren Sapstead then approached the lectern. She explained that she had been the current tenant of the stables for almost 2 years since her former stables had burnt down. She pays rent of £1040 pm which she says looking at financial records, provides one third of the parish council's income. The stables were in a dilapidated state when she arrived and she has been making improvements at her own expense. One person had asked for DIY livery, and at £25 pw, she did turn them away as it wasn't financially viable for her. A local livery expert who reportedly helped JS with his DIY livery proposal is also a friend of LS'. When asked if she had offered to help run a DIY livery at Northiam, the answer was no. She also charges £35 pw for DIY livery, but for this price horse-owners have use of an indoor & outdoor school, 200 acres of land to ride on, all bills are included and fields maintained. LS said that she has been paying for the upkeep of the land at SFF. JS' proposals for gymkhanas etc. are not feasible due to the costs for example of insurance to hold an event such as that. She accused the PC of breaking the law as her contract states that she should be able to get on with her business peacefully. She then spoke to him directly and said that he has caused her immense stress and suffering; she had lost 2 customers due to his postings on social media which began in August last year. Finally, she said that JS has also ignored her letter sent earlier in the week asking for a public retraction and apology.

Cllr Maltby then spoke. He said that he has been a councillor for 6 years and never thought it would include the police being involved, legal action being pursued, terms such as whistle blowers, redacted material, and such a high turnover of councillors, clerks & chairman. Trust and integrity are being called into question and the PC has become divisive, acrimonious and it's now worse than ever. With so many accusations both professional and personal, it is difficult to see any way forward. SFF was purchased to prevent large scale housing development and to eventually make it into a profit-making enterprise leading to a reduction in council tax for the village. He had hoped that with all the mis-information being put on social-media platforms, more residents would have attended PC meetings to ask questions directly and therefore become better informed and more involved.

He summarised with 3 key points that were his personal opinions:

1. The current tenant has been poorly treated by NPC when she has invested her time & money in an asset that belongs to the whole village and he hopes that she will not leave and they will try to become better landlords.
2. The CIC and all the volunteers have done a very good job so far and despite various constraints have achieved a great deal – he sincerely hopes that they and the SFF project survives this debacle.
3. Finally, he gave his full backing to PS and his wife Ruth who have had to tolerate a great deal of abuse in difficult circumstances. He thought it outrageous that PS should have had his integrity challenged and he thanked them for all that they do for the village and its charities.

Trevor Gilbert (TG) then said that he had earlier submitted questions about the viability of the DIY livery proposal to the Clerk and as time did not permit him to read all the questions out, he would like them attached as an appendix, and made available on the website, together with the written responses. David Amphill asked who the questions were addressed to and TG replied that for the most part, they were to the PC as a whole and some to individuals where appropriate.

Joe from Mill Corner said that he had lived in Northiam for 2 years and wanted to express that it is a great place to live and that's largely down to PS and everything he does for the village. He has a young family and a big house that needs renovating, so his time is limited. But he does appreciate that things take time, and the dreams for SFF are good but need to be given time to be realised.

Richard Ghyll then said that he has lived in the village for about 20 years and he was appalled by the comments on social media and that he had never read anything like it before. However, he wanted it noted, that the discussions seemed to be all about horses, and that other things also exist – beekeepers, potters etc. so please bear that in mind when planning for the future of SFF.

Jon Fenton then addressed the room. He felt that it was time to put all the allegations/accusations/recriminations behind us and address the more immediate and daunting issues that lie ahead. He also stated that he is a very big fan of PS and the late Ray Harrington-Lowe, and has absolutely no doubts about their integrity nor their commitment to make the SFF project work for the benefit of the whole village. His understanding is that the CIC is confident that if the current rental income from the two bungalows and stables is maintained, together with the £50,000 precept as agreed in the second referendum, there will be sufficient income to make the re-payments of the government loan. However, he feels that rather than agreeing to maintain the status quo, the PC believes they can increase the income from the stables by running a DIY operation. However, the CIC have taken professional advice, and disagrees with this which has led to the strained relations between the two parties. The PC itself is riven with serious tensions and the current impasse could put in doubt the complete SFF project which the whole village voted for. He therefore went on to propose the following:

1. The lease remains with a single tenant for an initial period of 5 years paying a market rate rental. This would provide a guaranteed income whilst other plans/grant applications come to fruition and give the tenant comfort.
2. That the CIC & NPC consider together the viability of DIY livery and make their findings and recommendations known to the village.
3. As a result of the serious tensions within the present parish council, which is causing stagnation and bad feeling within it and the village as a whole, all 8 councillors should resign and stand for re-election, barring the Chair, Cllr Schlesinger, who has only recently taken up the post and in his opinion already has the confidence of many in the village.

Jeff, who lives in Beales Lane reiterated his son (Joe's) favourable comments about Northiam. He asked a question of Cllr Streatfeild: "Why did you send that letter? Did you have a point to prove? Or was it just to be spiteful having earlier stated that you didn't get on with PS? I think you are a divisive character. For fifteen years, I've seen PS & other guys

doing lots around the village but I've never seen you before and I think you should resign." Cllr Streatfeild chose not to respond.

Cllr Biggs then addressed the room again. He wanted to refute the comment that he thought Jon Penton (JP) had made that the whole PC was in favour of DIY livery – TB said that this was not the case. JP said that he hadn't said that and reiterated his suggestion for the PC and the CIC together to consider all options for the stables, and then present their findings and subsequent decision to the whole village. TB said in that case he apologised.

TB then read from another statement about the realities of DIY livery: that fact that no stables could survive on DIY livery alone and that after paying business rates and other costs, the CIC would receive little or no income. The need to buy in bedding and food as a group often led to some taking more than others and the potential for disagreements amongst horse-owners was likely. TB then stated that the author of that statement had been Cllr Streatfeild. This was greeted with cheering and applause.

Cllr Schlesinger then asked if Cllr Streatfeild wanted to reply to the various issues that had been raised.

JS said that he would and went on to reiterate that the site is meant to be a community asset and if you have a sole commercial operator, that can't happen. "WHY NOT?" several shouted from the audience. JS said that a business would need to run the site for its own good. All the things that had been promised to the people of the village in the referendum and the paper for the government loan are not happening. The Pop-up Pub only happened once – there is no full-time pub as promised. JP interrupted from the audience to state again categorically to JS that DIY livery will not provide the required income to pay the interest on the loan and that he has been told this several times.

JS said that in the government loan application, PS suggested DIY livery in his budgetary assessment. PS said that he was given that information by Cllr Farmer.

Carol Biggs introduced herself as the wife of Cllr Biggs and said that she wasn't in favour of buying SFF from the start. She attended every PC meeting, listened to the whole process and spoke at meetings. Every time she wanted to ask a question about the purchase JS strongly informed her that the CIC were going to run it, not the PC. She then joined the CIC having decided to support the plan, despite her reservations, as she wanted it to be a success. However, as her husband then duly became a councillor, she decided to step down. It was very hard work taking place during lockdown etc. and she wanted to commend all the volunteers and the CIC. She felt from the beginning that JS always wanted to run the site like the Blue X, and in her opinion his stance had not changed.

Jonathan Strong (JVS) then came to the lectern and said he had 1 or 2 points to make and a question to ask JS: The first point being that in the Nov. 2020 meeting as mentioned in JS' social media post, the CIC had not yet been formed. However, they were keen to take over the admin & management of SFF and an independent architect pointed out that Rother DC were looking for sites in the locality for development. 3 members of the CIC attended that meeting and 3 sites were identified, but those attending decided it was premature to offer them to RDC. The primary function of the CIC was to produce all the ideas for SFF and present them to the village. He clarified that there was nothing underhand about that meeting.

His 2<sup>nd</sup> point was that the site has got to produce income and can't just be for community activities. The hub will be able to do a lot of that once it's developed. In the contract between the PC and the CIC, one of the things that the CIC is obliged to do in the first schedule is identify the liability & viability of the existing building. Once agreed, a strategic plan can be put to Rother District Council. None of this can happen without NPC approval and it may therefore be a good idea if JS reads this document – signed in August & revalidated in November - and understands it.

JVS then wanted to come to his question but gave some background first: In the open letter it was clear that someone had been disclosing private emails sent between directors of the CIC. This individual handed those emails to JS. Having come from a corporate background, JVS found it extremely painful and hard to believe that behaviour. JS had stated that the meeting on 18<sup>th</sup> Nov was called to explain those emails – this is not true. Judith O'Conner (JOC) had suggested a meeting to the then Chair, Jacqui Harding, as relations had become so toxic. In that meeting, TB made reference to the leaked emails, but the CIC still doesn't know the contents. One issue that has since come to light, has been resolved. JOC was very angry and had to leave the meeting. JVS stayed to ask if copies of the emails could be provided but that was not permitted.

His question to JS: In the opening paragraph of your letter, you said that it was **your** letter. Did you write it on your own?

JS answered that it was written by him alone over a period of a month gathering written evidence from other sources. Members of the audience said that he had recently been asked to produce this written evidence, so when would he provide it. JS said that he would produce it tomorrow (Friday). JVS asked if that would include the leaked emails? He went on to repeat to the audience that JS had just said he wrote the letter himself. JVS then asked why in that case on the 17 occasions he refers to "we, our and us" – who is he referring to/writing for? And that a direct answer would be appreciated.

JS said that after JVS had sent 8 seven or eight page questionnaires with the same questions a director of the CIC came to him stating that JVS was trying to make him lose his temper and give up. It was stated that the CIC were determined to make him give up on DIY livery.

JVS replied as follows: both he and Sarah Giles were the authors of the stables report. It stems from a Sept 18<sup>th</sup> liaison meeting, suggesting that the lease with LS be renewed when JS had asked if the option of DIY livery had been considered? The answer was No. JS said he was going to produce a business plan to this end, and the CIC offered to look at the options. The 8 questionnaires/exchanges were because JS's document was not a business plan. It had very few facts and no costs to analyse for a comparison exercise. For example, only half-way through this exercise, it became clear that the objective was for the PC to run the DIY livery, but they do not have the power to do that. Option 2 of the Stables Report shows a lease route which could achieve a mix of commercial and DIY livery but it does not make financial sense to run DIY livery only.

Jacky Broad then spoke to say that she had lived in Northiam for 50 years and has spoken passionately about SFF on previous occasions. She is one of the founding directors, and albeit by volunteering, she has put her money where her mouth is. She appealed to the

audience that when casting their vote in the upcoming by-election, they should vote for the future. The Blue Cross is no more and the CIC is a new entity that needs their support – the village doesn't need to be squabbling about it. She pleaded for residents to look to the future, not the past and do something with SFF for all of the village to enjoy.

The final contribution from the floor was from Jason Foster, who stated that as today was World Optimism Day he wanted to provide some hope for the future. Having been born and educated in the village, he concurs that Northiam is a very special place. He was part of the team that surveyed the site to make sure the villagers were getting value for money. Thinking about how to move forward, he has spent 2 years developing this plan to re-establish our cultural heritage. (A large green map was being held up). Lost England is a genuinely led community project, a charity, a social enterprise, a not-for-profit organisation. He would like to offer it to the Chair as something else to think about having been in touch with Historic England. He implored the audience to take the time to have a look at it.

Finally, David Ampthill stood up to close the meeting. He felt that he had witnessed local politics in the raw - all sorts of ideas had been discussed and the air had been cleared. He had a modest sense of optimism and with a by-election in a few weeks and further elections next year the village had the chance to direct the make-up of the parish council. The PC is in charge of this operation and the managing agents are the CIC. He then congratulated the Chair for arranging the opportunity for the village to have held an open meeting.

Meeting closed 8.33pm